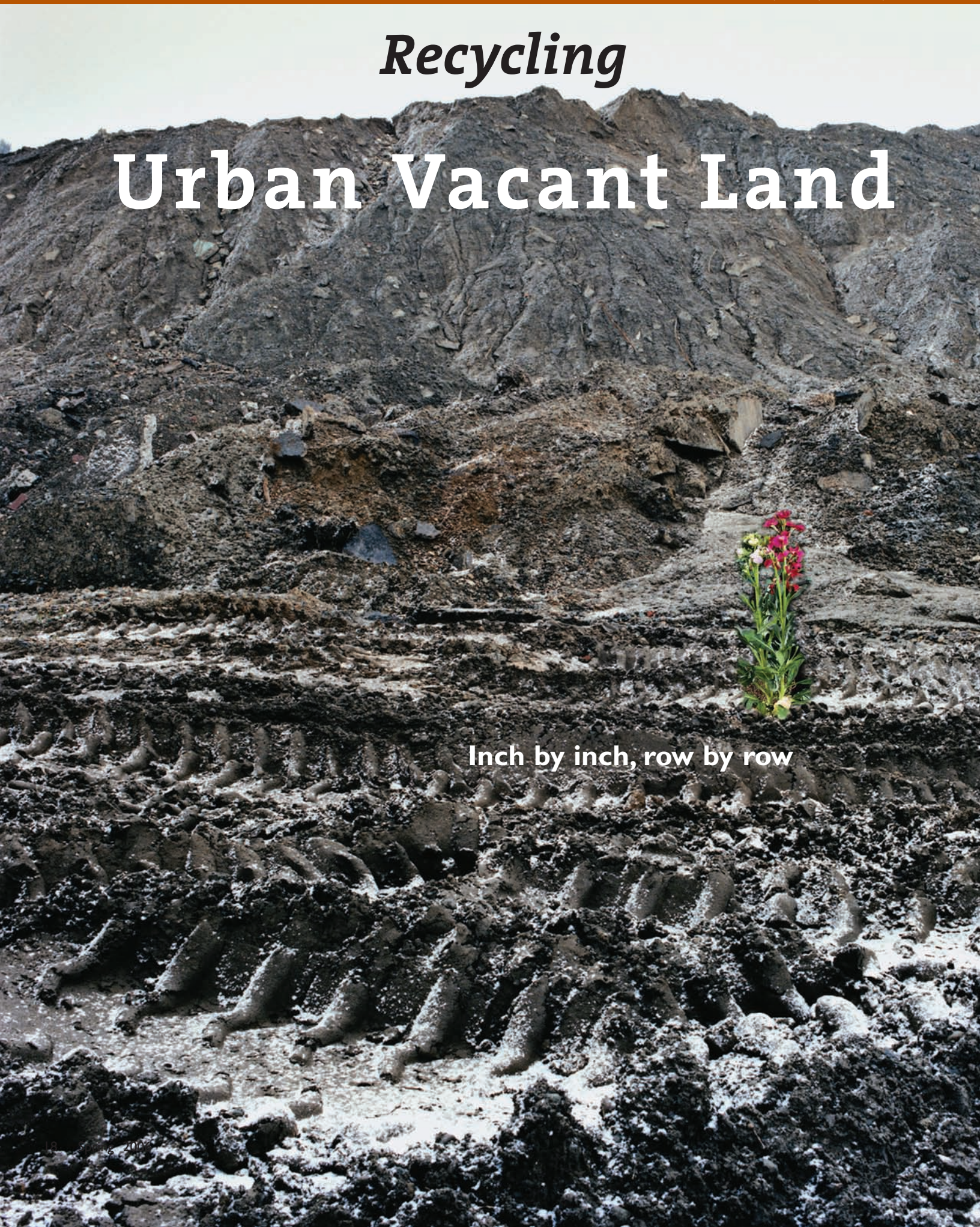
Recycling

Urban Vacant Land



Inch by inch, row by row

Neighbors Reclaim Neighborhoods

Vacant, abandoned, and contaminated properties in urban areas can be both an eyesore and an opportunity. In an urban residential neighborhood, vacant land decreases property values and scares off development for both the actual site and the surrounding neighborhood.

But vacant land can also provide opportunities for neighborhood transformation. Sometimes scattered parcels, formerly the site of a corner store or dilapidated apartment building, can be magnets for civically engaged dreamers who, with enormous effort, transform these plots into urban gardens, new housing, or businesses. Such redevelopment may transform only a single lot, and the transformation may be short-lived. However, under the best circumstances, it may bring jobs, tax dollars, improved infrastructure, and even more development to the neighborhood – while reducing health and environmental risks.

Over the decades, changes in U.S. industrial structure have rippled through the economy. In New England, as industries have declined and relocated and then given birth to new industries, their fortunes have been reflected in cities, towns, and neighborhoods. The presence of these vacant, abandoned, and contaminated properties is one of the consequences of such changes. Some of these parcels may have been abandoned because of industrial decline, others because of population shifts from central cities to suburbs.

Revitalizing the Northeast

New England has some outstanding examples of reuse. Textile mills in Maynard, Massachusetts, became the headquarters of Digital Equipment Corporation (DEC) and today serve several other organizations. The former Boston Insulated Wire and Cable company in the Dorchester section of Boston became headquarters for the marketing firm Spire.

Yet some cities, towns, and neighborhoods continue to be overlooked by investment. When both the private for-profit and public sectors have passed over opportunities, nonprofit developers—community-based organizations including CDCs and other neighborhood planning and development organizations—have stepped in. They have done so in an effort to mitigate the negative effects of the abandoned sites as well as to incorporate the redevelopment into larger plans for reclaiming their neighborhoods.

Consider the Boston Insulated Wire and Cable Company site. In 1994 Dorchester Bay Economic Development Corporation (DBEDC) bought the contaminated 4.7-acre parcel, which had been abandoned for a decade. DBEDC redeveloped it by assembling multiple public, private, and community stakeholders, eliminating back taxes and multiple title problems and putting together a financing package with participation from at least 17 public, private, and nonprofit organizations. Having Spire headquarters there has meant more than 100 jobs, including some at entry-level. Spire also offers job training for residents in this lower income area.[1]

Another example of creative reuse of abandoned sites in inner city neighborhoods is Philadelphia's New Kensington Community Development Corporation (NKCDC). Since the mid-1990s, NKCDC has been converting abandoned sites into urban parks, urban gardens, and urban farms. On some sites, plantings, trees, and park benches have replaced piles of construction debris. These parks may serve only as transitional land uses; in the meantime they dissuade illegal dumpers from using the neighborhood as a solid waste dump. The conversion has been so successful that over time that NKCDC's challenge has shifted from dealing with abandonment to dealing with rising land values.[2]

Urban farms are an example of an even more ambitious nontraditional use than small parks. Just three miles from downtown Philadelphia, Greensgrow Farm sits on the site of a former steel-galvanizing facility. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) completed demolition of the site in 1988. Greensgrow began site development in 1998. Since then they have added a greenhouse, a seasonal nursery, and a farm stand.

Today, instead of steel products, the site produces agricultural products —lettuce, tomatoes, herbs, and flowers —grown in greenhouses and purchased directly by local restaurants. In addition, Greensgrow Farm, like other such enterprises, provides training and employment opportunities for neighborhood residents, including young people. It makes food available for homeless shelters and food kitchens, and it beautifies the neighborhood by planting flowers along the perimeter. The flowers are later sold to restaurants for table decorations.

by Rosalind Greenstein and Yesim Sungu-Eryilmaz

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The community building potential of recycling urban land is also apparent at Centro Agrícola in Holyoke, Massachusetts. Neighbors whose roots are in rural Puerto Rico pass on their agricultural skills to young people. The urban agricultural center has spawned a bakery, a restaurant, greenhouses that grow produce such as peppers and herbs, and a kitchen available to community entrepreneurs with catering businesses.

In the case of urban agriculture, the community benefit seems to precede the economic benefit. Neighbors —often acting through a community-based nonprofit planning and development organization—begin to dedicate themselves to neighborhood improvement. A spirit of community may be built around an urban garden, as Roberto Velázquez of Holyoke's Nuestras Raices explains: "Gardens are of great benefit to the community because they keep people busy and they bring people together to beautify the neighborhood."[3]

Beyond Sweat Equity

The investment of such community organizations may be strictly "sweat equity," but in the most successful cases sweat equity is supplemented with contributions from the private sector and from city, local, and national foundations. Both community labor and capital are needed. The volunteer labor is what cements neighbors' commitment to community revitalization. However, funds are also needed—to purchase tools, plants, soil, design services, and so on.

A 2004 study examining the direct impact of so-called greening investment on Philadelphia's neighborhoods found that improvements on vacant land resulted in increases of as much as 30 percent in surrounding housing values.[4] New tree plantings were shown to increase housing values by approximately 10 percent. In the New Kensington area of Philadelphia this translated into a $4 million gain in property values through tree plantings and a $12 million gain through lot improvements. Neighborhood improvements, increased values, and the spirit of community all appear to contribute to the mix that attracts newcomers.

Community-based organizations (CBOs) interested in redeveloping brownfield sites must be extremely skilled. Ideally, a CBO should embody a combination of sophisticated real estate developer, skilled community organizer, resourceful nonprofit agency director, and visionary strategic planner.

Moreover, as Margaret Dewar and Sabina Deitrick explain in their book *Recycling the City*, CBOs should consider how to ensure that their brownfield redevelopment is successful in a way that makes sense for their core mission of providing benefits to their community.[5] In other words, they need to pursue development in the context of their "existing community plans or goals—whether in housing, business development, environmental improvement, or targeted historic preservation."

Dewar's and Deitrick's evidence is based on case studies of CBOs in Pittsburgh and Detroit. In a Pittsburgh project, after the city proposed using a former steel site for riverboat gambling, which was opposed by the neighborhood residents and businesses, the community development corporation engaged in a master planning process with the Urban Redevelopment Authority of Pittsburgh.

The master plan guided the creation of a mixed-use development. The project helped achieve the goal of revitalizing a key area of the neighborhood and creating new jobs, some of which went to local residents. The neighborhood's success in planning for reuse of the former steel site stemmed from a neighborhood planning process begun in 1990 and its ability to connect the redevelopment project with the neighborhood and its goals.

But in Detroit, when an old industrial area was redeveloped, the community-based organization requested only part of what the residents wanted. Although it sought to prevent illegal dumping and to get trucks rerouted away from residential areas, it failed to request help with two of the low-income residents' most important needs: preference in hiring and relocation aid for neighbors closest to the project. The CDC was never able to reconnect the brownfield redevelopment with the neighborhood.

So although, CBOs may facilitate redevelopment on brownfield sites by using community organizing skills and by building partnerships, the success of such projects needs to be evaluated against the goals of the neighborhood and of the overarching desire for community betterment.

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Endnotes

1 See Dorchester Bay Economic Development Corporation,. www.dbedc.com, and U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, www.epa.gov.ne/brownfields.

2 Sandy Salzman, "Recycling Vacant, Abandoned, and Contaminated Properties in New Kensington,"http://www.communitylots.org/brownfields/courses.html.

3 See http://www.nuestras-raices.org/new_page_4.htm.

4 Susan Wachter, "The Determinants of Neighborhood Transformations in Philadelphia: Identification and Analysis: The New Kensington Pilot Study" (working paper, The Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, 2004).

5 Margaret Dewar and Sabina Deitrick, "The Role of Community Development Corporations in Brownfield Redevelopment" in *Recycling the City: The Use and Reuse of Urban Land*, eds. Rosalind Greenstein and Yesim Sungu-Eryilmaz (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, 2004).